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Female Migrant Labor in the Philippines: The Institutionalization of Traditional Gender Roles in the Name of Economic Development

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This paper investigates the ways the Philippines' government applies Filipino ideas of femininity and kinship in pushing Filipina women into becoming transnational migrants as a means of economic development. Given that remittance money sent back by migrants to the Philippines makes up nearly ten percent of the country's GDP, and that over half of Filipino overseas migrants are female, the Filipino government is committed to maintaining and overseeing transnational migration. As a way to maintain economic stability, the Filipino government has utilized traditional conceptions of femininity, domesticity, and kinship that influence the procurement, recruitment processes of oversea migration, and the creation of policies that regulate Filipina transnational migration.

1 Introduction

In theory, development projects and policies aim to stimulate economic growth (Rigg 2016: 24) and thus create conditions of economic stability. However, closer examination of development projects in the long run reveal that development projects that entail economic growth actually create more distributional inequality (24). Furthermore, distributional inequality is manifested through structural inequalities, including gender, class, and ethnic inequalities (25).

In the Philippines, one of the country's important developmental projects involves the use of overseas migrant laborers, whose labor, commodified in the form of remittances, plays a pivotal role in contributing to the country's GDP. However, even with the use of overseas labor in stimulating economic growth, the Philippines continues to experience high rates of income inequality, as indicated by the country's high GINI coefficient of .43 (World Bank, 2015).

Given that a significant portion of Filipino overseas laborers are female, I decided to investigate the ways in which the Filipino government encourages women to work overseas in their development projects. Remittances allow the government to maintain economic stability in the Philippines despite the lack of sufficient domestic jobs. The government uses Filipino ideas of femininity, domesticity, and kinship that influence the procurement and recruitment processes of transnational migration and to create policies that regulate female migration.

From 1981 to 2011, approximately 1.8 million Filipinos have migrated across the globe in search of employment (International Organization for Migration 2013: 50). The increase in overseas labor stems from historic structural inequalities of class and gender, domestic economic troubles, and income inequality that created more poverty and instability in the Philippines. Thus, this paper will cover a general history of the Philippines' development from the pre-colonial, Spanish and American colonial period, and post-independence by focusing on the gender constructions and economic structures and characteristics present in each period. After discussing the overall historical context, I will briefly describe the current state of development and poverty in the Philippines. The final portion of the paper will consist of an analysis of the ways in which the Filipino government has utilized policies shaped by Filipino conceptions of gender and kinship norms and economic and political interests into using Filipina migrant laborers into working overseas as a means of development.

2 Historical Context

Prior to colonial rule, gender roles of men and women in the Philippines were relatively balanced (Cruz 2012: 526). For example, women had property rights and assumed important roles in agriculture, as well as conflict resolution and alliance building (526). Other important rights that indigenous women possessed included the ability to play a role in divorce decisions and control their sexuality (526). While indigenous women had some of the same rights as men, issues such as the regulation of a woman's marriage indicated the presence of a patriarchal hierarchy (526). Also, only men in pre-colonial societies were involved in more "masculine" roles, such as war (526).

2.1

After Spanish arrival in the Philippines in 1565 (Larkin 1982: 595), existing economic systems and constructions of gender and family were restructured to serve Spanish economic goals. For example, the Spanish "enlisted elements of the native ruling class to organize the labor force" (601). Derived from the pre-colonial economic hierarchy, these *principales* (601), who act as mediators between the Spanish colonial rulers and the remaining indigenous population, were entitled to certain privileges, such as tax breaks, special titles, and use of the work force for their own desires (601). This colonial system has implications for today's existing inequalities between middle-class and elites and the remaining impoverished population.

Resto Cruz (2012) further argues that in order to create a public sphere controlled by elite men who oversaw "local administration and taxing" (527), the Spanish institutionalized ideas of "mobility

and domesticity” (527) to the gender ideals. For example, the Spanish wanted indigenous elites who oversaw local administration to assume control over their wives and daughters. This control was aided with ideas of female chastity, modesty, and confinement within the domestic sphere. The Spanish also altered ideas of kinship by imposing a heteronormative family ideal consisting of a monogamous husband and wife (Cruz 2012: 527), which differed from the more fluid pre-colonial kinship ideas of many indigenous groups. The Spanish’s imposition of the heteronormative family ideal contributed to the creation of a class formation that allowed elite families to maintain their wealth (527).

2.2.1

Over the course of the Spanish colonization, the Philippines was relatively stagnant in terms of development and inequality until the early nineteenth century; “the period of most dramatic change in all of the Philippines history was the century between 1820 and 1920” (Larkin 1982: 612). At this point, after the end of the Napoleonic war, the Industrial Revolution reached the Philippines, and the coastal cities of Manila, Iloilo, Cebu, and a few others exploded. The international commerce of the Philippines rose from approximately 4.3 million to 456 million British pounds during this time (613). Also, foreign investment brought machinery and greater industrialization to the coastal cities. This great intrusion into the inner lowlands brought with it the dominance of Christianity and the creation of large-scale agriculture that was run by coastal elites and worked on by the inner island indigenous peoples (613). The creation of large-scale agriculture that benefited Christian coastal elites displaced non-Christians and compelled many to migrate further inland. Specifically, since non-elite indigenous women had labor obligations that entailed long-term separation, resisted colonial gender and kinship norms, and were unable to afford church-sanctioned marriages, many began to migrate to Manila for economic and sexual labor (Cruz 2012: 528). This migration propelled by economic marginalization marked the beginning of female migration in the Philippines.

2.2.2

Additionally, the American colonial power in the Philippines applied American Homestead laws, which enabled the seizure of indigenous frontier land. As a result, there was little frontier left and much of the jungle had been converted to plantations for cash crops (Larkin 1982: 617). Along with the jungle, much of the indigenous Philippine tradition was reduced as the last pockets of native communities were integrated into the new global system. By the end of a century of frontier development, the elite class had spread over the entirety of the archipelago and controlled both the majority of the wealth and the entirety of the political power, even though their numbers only accounted for ten percent of the population (618). The fixation of the elite class in the social structure made nearly all social mobility impossible.

During Spanish and American rule, taxes that were made to protect foreign investments instead of local industry were imposed, stunting the growth of industry and forcing it to remain heavily reliant on a large work force of underpaid and over-worked laborers doing predominantly agricultural work (620). These taxes inhibited industry from developing and created an increasingly stratified society, which thus lead to the creation of an impoverished working class. Continuing on from the frontier century and the loosening of the colonial grip, the Philippines was fraught with violence and revolution by a plethora of different ideologies and religions that were suppressed by years of homogenized beliefs (623).

2.3

Before any of these revolutions had a chance for victory, the Philippines was then colonized by the United States in 1901 (Larkin 1982: 595), and the U.S assisted the standing government in suppressing these revolutions. This support simply postponed the inevitable and created even

greater divisions between both the rich and poor, and different religions and ideologies. Furthermore, during American colonial rule, gender and kinship ideals that maintained the elite class were further institutionalized, such as through the use of legislative elections (Cruz 2012: 529). However, with American colonization also came new opportunities for Filipina women as part of an effort to “civilize” or “modernize” them. These opportunities included public education, healthcare, and professional fields (529). However, these efforts primarily benefited elite women, and women from lower economic backgrounds were still confined to the informal and domestic work sectors (529). Restrictive policies that were intended to protect domestic workers were also created during American colonial rule based on ideas of women being weaker and physically different from men (529).

2.4

During independence movements, Filipinos began to decimate American gender conceptions and go back to more Spanish and Catholic ideas of gender and kinship (Cruz 2012: 530). Political elites considered men to be the defenders of the nation, while women were seen as being in need of protection (530). After the Philippines gained independence from American colonial rule in 1946, the country began to create an import-substitution industrialization economy consisting of large-scale manufacturing of productions for domestic consumption, and a protective tariff to protect domestic industry (Tyner 1999: 675). However, this economic strategy was largely ineffective, as it was unable to meet the demands of economic development (675). Rising political tensions and a growing labor force also contributed to the economic and social deterioration of the Philippines (675).

2.5

During his rule, Ferdinand Marcos oversaw policies that attempted to transform the Philippines’ economy into one with export-industrialization and agriculture (Tyner 1999: 675). However, in 1972, Marcos declared martial law in the Philippines in the midst of rising economic and political conflict and in order to foster economic activity (Kushida 2003: 120). He strayed from the policies that had gotten him elected for a second term and began to give major tax breaks to foreign investors. Furthermore, because of his stance against the Soviet Union, Marcos received aid from the U.S. and institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, which benefited Marcos and his cronies (120). However, the Philippines continued to spiral in economic decline, with rising unemployment. During his rule, Marcos and his wife embodied traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity (Cruz 2012: 531). Marcos’ rule established the masculinization of state power that endured even during Corazon Aquino’s years and beyond (531). This masculinization would later influence policies of migration.

After Marcos was removed from office by the People Power revolution in 1986, the Philippines was left in an economic standstill. In an effort to revitalize the economy, policy makers “embarked on a series of trade liberalization programs”, as well as “the liberalization of foreign investments, liberalization of the foreign exchange markets, privatization of government owned and controlled corporations, and the opening up of previously oligopolistic industries such as telecommunications and shipping, among others” (Orbeta 1996: 2). Many analysts were hopeful that these policy changes would help to grow internally oriented industry and, if sustained, invigorate the economy of the Philippines in the near future (2).

3 Development and Poverty in the Philippines

Since Marcos’ presidency, the inflation of the service sector, without an increase of revenue output, has caused a massive increase in workers looking for overseas contract work (International Organization for Migration 2013: 32). Even with the large number of people leaving the country for work, the Philippines’ average unemployment rate is 6.8 percent of the total labor force; the

next closest country in Southeast Asia is Indonesia with a 5.9 percent unemployment rate (World Bank, 2015). The high rate of unemployment is attributed to the rapidly increasing population (International Organization for Migration 2013: 29). The Philippines has a population growth rate of 1.6 percent (World Bank, 2015). Although the situation seems grim, some of the poverty indices have improved. The percentage of Filipinos living on less than \$3.10 a day has declined from 55.8% in 1985 to 36.4% in 2011, according to the World Bank. Also, the national population growth rate has been reduced from 2.4 percent in 1990 to 1.6 percent in 2011, according to the World Bank. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand have all posted higher rates of decline, ranging from 1.4 to 2 percent as opposed to the Philippines, with less than 1 percent. However, despite the reduced population growth rate, it is still an important factor in relation to poverty rates in the Philippines (Asian Development Bank 2009: 44). With a GINI coefficient of .43, income inequality is also an important factor in influencing poverty rates in the Philippines. Additional factors that influence poverty rates include the lack of “quality employment in sectors with large numbers of the poor” (43), as well as rising food prices (44).

3.1

In 2012, the Philippines had an unemployment rate of 7.1 percent, which was a slight improvement from 7.3% in 2010 (World Bank, 2015). The shortage of jobs in the country is due to its rapid population growth as well as an increase in women's participation in the workforce (Asian Development Bank 2009: 43). In 1997, the workforce was at 23.9 million people and increased by 50% to 37.1 million by 2008 (42). The growth in the number of potential workers makes the country even more susceptible to poverty, especially as employment opportunities have failed to keep up with the growth. Both the manufacturing and agricultural sectors have both declined. As a result of the decline in manufacturing and agriculture, many have joined the informal sector domestically, accounting for 10.5 million underemployed workers. (43).

3.1.1

Migration for full employment has been another pathway for unemployed and underemployed Filipinos. As previously stated, approximately 1.8 million Filipinos have migrated to other countries as a response to the lack of employment from 1981 to 2011 (International Organization for Migration 2013: 50). The migration of professionals has contributed to the phenomenon known as the “brain drain” in which the country is losing its skilled labor force at enormous rates (Finch 2013: 1). However, in addition to professionals leaving the country, a significant number of Filipinos not trained in professional fields are also migrating overseas in search of employment (International Organization for Migration 2013: 67).

4 Filipina Migrant Laborers

As of 2012, 2.25 million Filipino migrant laborers work abroad, of which 54.5% are women (Philippine Commission for Women, 2012). Thus, nearly 5 percent of the entire Philippines’ population works overseas (Calzado, 2007). Most of the female migrants are involved in domestic work and care-taking. Their remittances, totaling to 27.3 billion U.S dollars (Migration Policy Institute, 2013), constitute nearly ten percent of the Philippines’ GNP, which makes the country the second largest labor exporting country in the world (Browne and Braun 2008: 19). Filipina migrant workers are employed worldwide; a significant number are working in the U.S, the Gulf States, and Europe (Lan 2003: 190). Many of the workers come from lower-middle and middle-class households and have higher levels of education (191). Filipina women’s decision to work overseas in domestic care influences their ideas of femininity and understandings of their duties as caretakers for their families (Barber 2000: 401). Additionally, women with college degrees seek overseas employment in low-skilled service jobs due to the “weak education system” that under-employs professionals (Cruz 2012: 534).

4.1 From Majority-Male to Female Migration

Although the majority of Filipino migrants are women, overseas migration was not always associated with women and femininity. During the American colonial period from 1907-1934, 150,000 Filipino laborers, who were primarily male, migrated to the U.S to work in agriculture (Asis, 2006). In 1934, restrictions were placed upon the number of visas assigned to Filipinos, which dropped the migration rates until 1965, when the Immigration and Nationality Act was struck down (2006). The lifts on restrictions on immigration thus allowed more Filipinos, particularly those in professional fields, such as medicine and nursing, to immigrate to the U.S (Parreñas 2000: 560). The migration of workers from professional fields contributed to the “brain drain” experienced in the late 1960s (560).

4.1.1

Prior to Marcos’ presidency, migrant labor was not regulated by the government. However, with the growing economic crisis, unemployment, inequality, and debt, the Filipino government, taking advantage of the Gulf States’ need for construction workers to build their large infrastructure, began to regulate the migrant industry (Kushida 2003: 120). To the Filipino government, overseas migrant labor would provide an outlet to channel the unemployed population out of the country as a way to relieve unemployment. In 1974, the Labor Code of the Philippines was enacted (Asis, 2006) that controlled various agencies that would later merge into the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) in 1982 (Tyner 1999: 679). Under the POEA, the government, in collaboration with private agencies, MNCs, worked with recruitment agencies to handle training program and contracts (Asis, 2006). As a means of poverty alleviation, Filipinos, who were primarily men initially, participated in the large-scale migration, to the Gulf countries (Asis, 2006).

4.2.2

Although Marcos intended the large-scale overseas migration to be a temporary measure to relieve unemployment, stimulate the economy, and pay off debts, the economic conditions continued to deteriorate, due to increasing unemployment, population growth, and low wages, as well as the Gulf states’ increasing demand for migrant labor during the 1970s (Barber 2000: 399, Asis, 2006). Women, who were also experiencing the effects of poverty domestically in the Philippines, saw the increase in labor opportunities in the service sector through East Asia as a means of poverty alleviation, and began to migrate overseas in increasing numbers (Tyner 1999: 678). Additionally, with the completion of infrastructure in the Gulf countries, came a decrease in demand for male migrant laborers, who were assigned masculinized work, such as jobs in construction, and an increase in demand for feminized service jobs to maintain such infrastructures. Thus, female migrants began to increase in the 1980s and especially the 1990s (Barber 2000: 400). This increase in demand for female migrant workers must be examined in a global context. Specifically, the feminization of migration labor that is associated with the liberalization of trade policies, the deindustrialization of the U.S and the industrialization of East Asian countries (Parreñas 2000: 564), has created the gender segregation of migrant labor. Specifically, with the increase in industry in East Asia, came the increased demand for female low-skilled domestic workers to fill in for women who started working in the new industries (564).

4.3 Institutionalized Gender Ideals and Female Migrant Labor

Given the significant economic benefit migrant labor provides to the Philippines and the increasing portion of migrant work being female, the Filipino government remains vested in promoting overseas jobs in domestic work to Filipina women, specifically to lower-middle class Filipinas. Remittances keep interest rates low and provide stable foreign exchange, which has afforded the Philippines a fairly stable economy (Cruz 2012: 539). Furthermore, a stable economy allows “sitting governments” to maintain power and thus maintain wealth by allowing the delay of important

reforms that would not benefit the state elites (539). Processes within the institutions involved in Filipino transnational migration have used traditional Filipino gender ideals and kinship ideas to encourage women to seek overseas employment. Such ideas especially manifest themselves in processes of contract procurement and labor recruitment institutionalized by policies that entail government agencies, such as the POEA, working with private employers and MNCs, locally and abroad (Tyner 1999: 674). For example, when searching for migrants to employ overseas, government agencies solicit the most appealing employment opportunities (674). In advertising to Filipina women, government agencies use existing ideas about Filipino and global ideas of femininity, such as their role as care-takers and taking responsibility for household work (673). Furthermore, to minimize the risk of hiring a migrant worker who is undesirable to labor-importers, government agencies also strive to fulfill the wishes of employers abroad by following reductive, stereotypical ideas of Filipina women being dutiful and a desirable labor population for the service sector (673).

4.4

Filipino ideals of gender and kinship also manifest in regulations and policies aimed to protect migrant workers from exploitation (Cruz 2012: 517). Given the heightened risk for experiencing exploitation and victimization abroad, Filipina women who migrate to work overseas are portrayed as “legitimate recipients of pity” (517). Such a conception of women in Filipino society stems from ideas that Filipina women are in need of protection, and that women are obligated to care for their families, even if it entails working abroad away from them.

4.5 The “Masculine” Filipino State

On a national level, the government works as an agent to encourage Filipina women to seek employment abroad by appealing to the need to protect Filipina women leaving their families behind in order to provide for them and risking exploitation in the process of fulfilling their duties. Assuming a “masculine” role, the Filipino government has passed laws and enacted policies aimed to protect female migrant workers overseas in low-skilled domestic work and thus make overseas migration more appealing (Cruz 2012: 517). For example, the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act, passed in 1995 after the execution of a Filipina domestic worker in Singapore who was accused of murder and amended in 2010, requires “mandatory training programs, codes of conduct, handbooks, and other modalities” for employees in order to protect Filipina migrants from victimization (517). Additionally, the “supermaid” program passed in 2006 entailed further training in order to protect Filipina migrant laborers from vulnerabilities by equipping them with a higher skill set and wages (517). The Filipino government is also involved in promoting of employment opportunities through advertisements, much like Figure 1, that portray Filipina domestic workers as heroic figures.

5 Conclusion

To summarize, even though the Philippines uses overseas labor to stimulate economic growth domestically through remittances, distributional inequality continues to be high. Given that migrants were initially male, it is impressive that nearly 54 percent of Filipino transnational migrants are now female. In this paper, I argued that in order to maintain economic stability in the Philippines that remittances allow, the government’s use of Filipino ideas of femininity, domesticity, and kinship influences the procurement and recruitment processes of transnational migration and to create policies that regulate female migration. To provide a solid foundation for my argument, this paper discussed the history of the Philippines’ from the pre-colonial, Spanish and American colonization, and post-independence period with a focus on gender ideals and economic structures. After providing historical context, I described the current state of poverty and development in the Philippines that compel Filipinos to seek overseas employment. This provided further context into my discussion on Filipina migrant laborers, and the ways the Filipino government, influenced by

Filipino and global ideas of femininity, kinship, and domesticity, compels Filipina women to seek employment abroad as a development project. I investigated the ways the Filipino government uses traditional ideas of women being caretakers in the procurement and recruitment processes of transnational migration by working with government private agencies, and MNCs that solicit appealing employment opportunities to encourage women to seek overseas employment. Additionally, I discussed the ways the traditional idea that Filipina women need to be protected manifests in policies aimed to protect female migrants from exploitation and victimization abroad.



Figure 1

Newspaper advertisement funded by the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (Tesda)

Source: <http://www.ellentordesillas.com/2006/08/09/gmas-supermaid-becomes-household-manager>

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